

After a driving tour of Australia we arrived from Melbourne to Auckland. From thereon we drove to our host's place in Hamilton. Hamilton is in the Waikato Region of the North Island, approximately 130 km South of Auckland. It was interesting to note some of the names of the little towns we passed, like Santa Cruz, Bombay, etc.

The first day in Hamilton, we set out for the Waitomo Caves. The Waitomo District is located in the King Country region, which covers the western central North Island from Taranaki to the Waikato. It has the world-renowned limestone formations and cave system which are most fascinating. 30 million years ago the entire Waitomo region lay far beneath the sea. Today, both above and below ground, it stands as a revealing testament to a landmark period in New Zealand's and the world's natural history.

The drive to the caves was so much like the English country side: Green meadows with cows grazing in some farms and sheep in others. Besides that we also passed some farms which were rearing Emus and Ostriches and Deer. Venison being a specialty of New Zealand, deer is a popular animal. The undulating landscape interspersed with greens and some snow peaked mountains and the animals, is something difficult to pen down. It *has* to be seen.



Emu

The Waitomo caves have been left more in their natural form. After the Jenolan caves in Australia where we could hardly understand the guide's accent, we had a guide whose accent was clear! The highlight of these caves was also the glow worms. The 45 minute tour ended with a boat ride through a little canal in the cave, which had a 'ceiling' of glow worms. It was like the sky on a clear day, which was suddenly covered with a plethora of stars. As if the sky had come down lower to reach out to us! Even if we had been allowed to capture them in a photograph, we could not have done justice.

The following day we headed for Tauranga, for the hot pools of Mt. Maunganui. Located in the Bay of Plenty, this area is one of New Zealand's most popular holiday destinations. A thriving port city, the Bay continues to offer its bounty of beaches, culture and lifestyle to visitors from near and far. Long before the first Europeans arrived in the Bay of Plenty, Maori were drawn to the area by its easy access to the coast and its "fruit bowl" qualities.



Maunganui Beach

At Mt. Maunganui, they had Hot Salt Water Pools. Healing salt water is warmed to a bone soothing 39°C in the large soaking pool, three private pools and two outdoor spa pools. There is also a cooler 32°C active pool and a toddler's pool with fountains, a waterfall and slide for the younger bathers. It was indeed very soothing. The light rain made it even more enjoyable. We got a 'senior' discount and had to pay just \$ 6 for the two of us while the family rate was \$21.50. The showers in these public places were interesting. You pushed a button and the water flowed for a few seconds. I suppose this must be a step towards water conservation.

When we got out of the pools we realized that most of the eating places had finished with lunch. Fortunately there was 'Breakers' which was open. After lunch we went off to the beach which was at the foot of the Mount. The sand was so white and their beaches are so clean. This was an extremely picturesque beach.

On the return journey we drove via the Maclain Falls. The day ended with a delicious BBQ of lamb cutlets (what we call chops) by Vishal and a Crisp Rice Noodle Salad by Ayesha! Fortunately it had stopped raining and we had a memorable evening out doors.

The next day it was decided that we should leave at 9 am to get to Auckland in good time. Alas we left only at 11 am. The Atlantic world was the first stop. We saw the penguins and the aquarium. What was more enjoyable was the picnic lunch we had by the beach. So amidst some drizzling we enjoyed our beer and sandwiches. A visit to one of the highlights of Auckland, the tallest building called the Tower, had to be aborted due to bad weather.



Vishal at BBQ!

The return journey became a bit tedious, as I suppose we were a bit tired by then. Being a cloudy day, the sky formations were extremely interesting. There were so many instances when one wanted to capture them in the camera, but could not do so.

The day arrived when we had to leave Hamilton. This day started with a bit of learning about traveler's cheques! We discovered that they are almost obsolete. We had been warned about this, but being old timers, we did not feel secure with only a credit card and cash. It took a long time to get them cashed. The reason being that with all of us wanting to exchange ours at the same time, the girl at the bank (only a few months into her job) was quite perplexed and had probably never handled that amount of cash! Bankers are seriously considering not taking on this anymore. Each transaction takes a minimum of 15 minutes. Turned out to be quite and educative morning.



The Lazy Billy Goat

As always, we headed straight for the info centre of Rotorua. We got a pretty good idea of all the accommodation around and booked ourselves for the Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Park tour for the next day. Before we

So it was a while before we were on our way to Rotorua in a Subaru by Europcar. It was a smaller car which was why the baggage was packed in with some difficulty. On way to Rotorua, we stopped at Fitzgerald Grove—called so because of the grove formed by the fern trees. The café at the end of it, where we had planned to have coffee was closed unfortunately. So all we could do was to admire a huge Emu, a cow and a white billy goat. They were either lazing or 'chewing the cud'.



Kuarau Sulphur Spring, Rotorua

found a place to stay we stopped at a restaurant for a bite. We finally checked in into a motel called Havana Motor Lodge. Looking for motels was our priority because of the excess baggage. The rooms were nice and spacious with a kitchenette, for \$95 per room.

Rotorua is renowned as the heartland of Maori culture. There are 16 lakes in the vicinity of Rotorua, many of which are fishable lakes packed with rainbow and brown trout. The lakes, all formed from the craters of extinct volcanoes, are a popular attraction for many water-based activities. From the moment visitors enter Rotorua they know they're somewhere quite different. Whether it's the sneaky threads of steam finding unlikely escape routes in parks, pathways and streets or the distinct scent of sulphur wafting through geothermal hot spots, Rotorua offers an impressive welcome.



Ah! What comfort!

We spent the afternoon sightseeing. Our first stop was the museum. The museum is quite avoidable. The park around it was more interesting. We strolled around the lakeside edge of the park. In fact it was nice to just sit there on a bench and watch the swans and birds. The next stop was the Kuarau Park. The park was full of geysers. Everywhere you looked there was steam emanating from the ground, some in a big cloud others in thin lines. Needless to say the whole air was rife with the smell of sulphur. At certain places in the park they had made little ponds

which had the warm water coming in. So we followed what others were doing and dipped our feet in it and sat around for sometime. It seemed to sap away all the tiredness from our feet.

Satiated with a full breakfast of eggs and toast, we left at 9.20 the following day braving heavy rain. It rained all through our drive to Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Village. And it was in a rain shower that we had to stand and watch the Lady Knox Geyser (pronounced 'Gaiser' and not 'Geeser'). As our guide pointed out, Geeser is a tottering old man. This Geyser erupts daily at 10:15am to heights of up to 20 metres. When it starts to bubble they put in a soap solution which makes it go that high. It reminded me of a giant anaar during Diwali fireworks.

The walk through this unique volcanic area took us about an hour and a half. And all this in a light rain, without a rain coat or umbrella! The whole area consisted of multi colored pools of hot water, steaming ground and expansive vistas. There were unique terrace formations and some constantly bubbling and erupting mud pools. All this in its natural setting. In some places these terrace like formations looked like glaciers, because the surface was whitish in color and the expanse was sloping down one side. All this was surely a



Wai O Tapu Thermal Park

unique and rare experience. Nevertheless, it was good to reach the warmth of the tourist shop after that and thaw out a bit!

We were now headed for Taupo, which is New Zealand's largest fresh water lake, volcanic wonderlands, a World Heritage Park and the famous Huka Falls, Lake Taupo is truly blessed with world class natural assets. We stopped at Huka falls on our way to Taupo. The Huka Falls are falls that come through a gorge, as a result of which they come gushing out. Walking along the edge of the fall was quite refreshing. Huka falls offer a lot of activities like a cruise, a jet boat ride or rafting. We saw some people on a jet boat, and I must admit it seemed very tempting. Since we had to reach Tongariro for the night, we could not afford the time.

The drive all through New Zealand is through verdant land. Even along the coast you have the sparkling blue water on one side and lush green vegetation on the other side. And closer to Waiotapu we saw immense number of geysers' steam on the distant hill side too. We had just enough time to stand on the Lake side for a while, but one could see that it would be an interesting place to spend some time. Seemed like a town basically for tourism and geared for it.



Bayview Chateau

Finally the much looked forward to destination had arrived. The Bayview Chateau, Tongariro, Mt. Ruapehu, NZ! Not only is this hotel highly recommended, but it was also expensive from our point of view. The princely sum of \$ 195 per room with breakfast. This beautiful hotel is located in the Tongariro National Park. Tongariro is New Zealand's oldest national park and a dual World Heritage area. This status recognises the park's important Maori cultural and spiritual associations, as well as its outstanding volcanic features. The other claim to fame is that a lot of the Lord of the Rings shooting had taken place in this area. The Village close to the hotel, which is within the boundaries of the National Park, is Whakapapa.

The Chateau was very charming indeed. The ambience was very English, complete with a fire place in the lounge and a piano. The rooms were pretty luxurious and all the windows looked out into lush greenery. After having been wet and cold for most of the day, I welcomed a hot tub bath and relaxed a while with my crossword. It was drizzling all the while and I had no desire to get out. It was beginning to get dark and the time was just 5.20pm. The days were short all along, being the start of winter.

We took a 'tour' of the hotel and checked out all the facilities—gym, laundry room, library, home theater, et al. by now the lounge was fairly well occupied. There were two fire places and both were occupied. The majority was senior citizens like us and more. Some couples who must have traveling alone were sitting by themselves with their drinks. We spent a rested evening with dinner in the hotel



Lava land Whakapapa 1

itself (not that there was anything around to do otherwise!).

We checked out the next morning after a leisurely and sumptuous breakfast. After checking out we drove up to the Whakapapa (Maori's pronounce it as Fakapapa) Ski resort through Volcanic lava land. The land was totally rocky and barren with no vegetation. This was surely a rare sight for us in New Zealand. The ski resort had the usual little shop besides the skiing requirements. Since the season had not started and we could only see the craggy looking hills, we wondered about how much snowfall must be needed to cover it all up. We were enlightened on this score by the girl at the counter who told us that they 'make' the ice! The view would have been gorgeous were it not for the clouds.

We now headed towards Wellington via the desert route. I had visions of an actual desert, but it merely meant 'barren' land edged by mountains. I was at the wheel and suddenly spotted a police car parked facing us on the road opposite, and at the same time Battan said, 'Bhabhi, Mamu!'. My eyes went to the speedometer automatically while I simultaneously slowed down and was quite complacent that I was under control in good time. Little did I know, the car started, went past us and took a U turn. Suddenly, the lights were blinking and the siren was on. Took me a few seconds to realize that they wanted me to stop! Stop I did and waited for them to come out, but they waited for me instead! The result was that I was handed a speeding ticket for \$120! They give you a grace of 8 kms above the limit (which is 100), and charge you \$10 per km above the limit. It was a first for me! They do not take the money, but give you a certain period within which you have to make a payment to a bank or a cheque to a police station. Live and learn! The roads are so smooth and empty, that one does not realize one is going beyond limits.

We arrived in Wellington at 4pm. First things first, we checked out the ferry port for early next morning and then managed to find a service apartment in Quest on Johnston. This was to be a very short stop as we had to leave for the ferry at 7.30 in the morning.

We reached the ferry quite early. After depositing the car *and* checking in, we were well in time to board at 8 am. The ferry ride was quite uneventful and rather slow. The rain kept us from going on deck except for a short while. Approaching Picton was like approaching Victoria from Vancouver. There were little hillocks on either side with some villas with their private boats along the coast.

Our first destination was Karaka Point. Not only was the drive to it beautiful, but the view from the view point was simply spectacular. We had a panoramic view of the Wakawa Bay. We aimed at spending the night half hour out of Picton in a winery. So we zeroed in on Blenheim, which is a wine area. At the info centre we chose a B&B called Thainstone, for \$ 120 per room, which looked pretty neat in the photograph. Took us while to find it though, as the sign for it was



Karaka Point

not very prominent. When we did arrive, it looked quite uninviting, in the sense that the garden looked unkempt. On ringing the door bell, there was no answer and just as we were turning away the door was opened by 'Jim'. He apologized for the delay as he was (gesture) on the computer.

On seeing the rooms, both of us changed our minds instantly. The rooms were on the first floor, and there was a comfortable looking room with a fire place on the ground floor. He indicated that one side of the house would be for us to use and the other was his private area. He had a huge kitchen where he said we could cook after he and his wife had left for bridge at 7. Of course we booked it for the night before going grocery shopping. The whole area comprised of vineyards all around.



Thainstone, Blenheim

When you stay at a winery, you are supposed to taste wine too. Thainstone was a winery, but Jim had sold off his share and was just growing grapes for them now. He opened one red and one white wine. A Scotsman from Aberdeen he moved to NZ some twenty years ago where he met his wife, Vivian. Jim had been to India and had interesting tales to relate about his trip. They had to be curtailed though because of his bridge commitment.

We were served a full breakfast with freshly cooked eggs, bacon, ham, fruit, cereal, etc. That is one thing about B&Bs which I really enjoy.

Destination Kaikoura! We left at 10. I drove all the way. Being wine area, we passed long



stretches of vineyards. It was interesting to see how they were tagged with the names of different grapes, I suppose. The major part of the drive was pretty close along the sea. One view point was the peninsula seal colony. These seals were better looking than the San Francisco seals (which were ugly and called sea lions). These were smaller and black. Across the road was a walking track which led to a water fall. En route we could see some baby seals frolicking in the little rivulet. It was a pretty cold and windy morning.

En route to Kaikoura

We reached Kaikoura around 1 pm. Before going farther, we stopped downtown in the market place. It was a cute and fascinating small town market. Found a Thai restaurant for lunch, which was good. It was now time to find accommodation and book our whale watching tour. I must mention here that it had been steadily raining all the time. Just out side the main town, facing the lake we found a hotel called 'Waves'. It seemed pretty newly built. The rooms we got were equipped with a kitchen and washing machine. For \$110 we thought it was a pretty good find. We asked if they had Waves in other towns too. We were told there weren't, because this belonged to a Father who had lost a young son, who was very fond of Kaikoura and had spent a lot of time here.

While we were having tea, it hailed outside. The room's view was so impressive that frankly one did not feel like going anywhere. Even though we were a bit apprehensive about the weather, we booked ourselves for whale watching at 7.30 am the next day. The hail had given way to light rain, so we drove around Kaikoura, along the lake and up the hill. Next we checked out the point where the whale watching tour would start from, so we did not waste time in the morning. All the time the rain seemed quite a deterrent though. We had decided we would not get out for dinner, as it would be so wet. So we shopped for our dinner. As the evening progressed we got cold feet and cancelled our tour for the next morning. It would have been too much to wake up at 6 and then find that the tour was cancelled.



Leaving Kaikoura

After a very satisfying breakfast of muffins and eggs, we left 'Waves' at 9.30. We drove to Kaikoura point, which commanded a extensive view of the town and the lake around. We left Kaikoura at 10 am. Our target on this day was to reach Christchurch. The first hour was along the sea and even after that it was scenic all the way.

Christchurch greeted us with rain, rain and rain. Everybody was at their wits end by now. We started with Cathedral Square which had the info center and shops. It took us quite a while to seek out the information about accommodation and things to do. After looking around we chose Avenue Motel which was on the corner of Colombo and Bealey's Avenue. At \$89 per room, it was good Value for money. Run by a Chinese, it was neat and clean, but no ambience or view. It had the usual kettle and microwave. Having checked in we got out to see what we could catch in this weather.

We drove around past the botanical gardens and then back to Cathedral Square (the main hub of Christchurch). We took a tram ticket each (which is usually for 2 days). The tram gave us a driving tour of Christchurch and back to the Square. While the three of us were at the info center, Pramilla found a place selling Merino sweaters at 40% off. The shop was closing down, so they were getting rid of their stock. Needless to say each of us picked up some. We had given up the idea of buying any, because they were so expensive. Of course, the rain did not relent all this time. The question now was about dinner. The general consensus was to collect a take away and we did so from an Indian restaurant this time. The first and the last in our whole trip. The food was not too bad considering it was in NZ. The restaurant was run by a couple from Chandigarh, and seemed fairly popular with the locals.



Christchurh Cathedral



Back in the room, every one talked about how the weather was getting all of us down. Serious thought was given to what should be done if the following day was the same. Might just go back home sooner. Robin the Chinese owner, told us

Botanical Garden, Christchurch that the weather prediction was 'cloudy but no lain'.

Well the day was cloudy and no 'lain'. Thank God for that. The Botanical Gardens was our first stop for the day. Before we knew it, we had spent more than an hour over there. Absolutely fascinating! We then headed for the Gondola ride. Fortunately it cleared enough for us to get the view of the city from all around, including the ocean and the bay.

Back at Cathedral Square we meandered around the river path before taking the tram to the City Mall. On one side of the Mall there was a line of restaurants which were facing the river. We sat in one which had little 'angeethi' like contraptions. Glass encased squares with 'coals' in the center fired by gas. It was cold outside and this was under an awning. We were amazed at how warm the place was with this, till we looked up and saw that there were blow heaters along the edge of the awnings! Brilliant idea! Especially since we wanted to sit out doors and not inside. So we had some wine and a plate of Tempura fish. After that we browsed around the shopping area and bought some gloves and socks for my self as it was getting rather cold and the glaciers were yet to come.



Awaiting the Tempura fishy

Our departure from Christchurch the next morning was a bit of an adventure. We were to catch the Tranz Alpine train, which is a scenic train which would take us to Grey Mouth in 4 ½ hours. The directions we got for the station seemed simple enough. Alas! We kept getting lost and went round in circles. Tension was mounting as the time of the train was drawing near and we had check in baggage and had to deposit the car too. The map and signages did not match and we were at our wit's end. In desperation we stopped to ask (for the third time) directions. This time it was a young lady getting out of her home. She tried to explain, when Bijjan requested her to pilot us, as we were in danger of missing our train. Due credit to her, she did it with a happy smile. It was just as well, because there were still quite a few twists and turns. We not only made it to the train but had about 15 minutes to spare, after checking in and finding our seats!

I cannot really describe the scenic beauty of this train ride. It's perhaps the most scenic train ride in New Zealand, and one of the most scenic train trips anywhere in the world. The TranzAlpine, runs once daily between Christchurch, Arthur's Pass and Greymouth on the South Island's west coast, through the amazing misty mountain scenery of the

Southern Alps. The journey takes 4½ hours, and if you like you can go there and back in a day with an hour in Greymouth. Or take the TranzAlpine one-way, and connect with buses down the west coast to Franz Josef Glacier.

We arrived at Greymouth by 12.45 pm. This time we took a GPS with the car, since it was \$10 per day as against \$25-30 quoted on the earlier laps. This was a first for all of us, so we were quite excited. The GPS led the way once we punched in the address and checked us with shouting ‘recalculating, recalculating’ as soon as we took a wrong turn. Sometimes she went on and on till we felt like saying (and said it too), ‘shut up’! We reached Franz Josef in about 2 ½ hours. As soon as we checked into the Alpine Glacier Motel, we decided to go to the glacier as otherwise it would get dark and we would not be able to do it the next day. The walk from the car park to the edge of the glacier was about 1 km. There was a large Gujerati group from Atlanta, as vociferous as ever.



Franz Josef Glacier

We were back in the motel by 5.45 or so and ready to relax. We had dinner at the ‘Alice May Bar’ which was a pub. Had some delicious pork ribs.



Fox's Glacier

The next day was planned for the Fox’s Glacier and then on to Wanaka. The car was covered with frost and we had to pour hot water to clear it before we started out. Along the drive the ground cover and bushes were all covered with frost. That was quite a novel experience for all of us. And the cold! My feet took about half an hour of walking towards the Fox’s Glacier before they thawed out. Nearing the glacier there was a pool of water that reflected the mountain of the glacier, like a mirror image. The glacier looked like the Gomukh glacier. We had an

hour’s walk to its base and back.

The drive continued along lakes and dense fern populated hills and we reached Arnott Point which had a three sided view of the ocean, with the horizon not visible. It stated on the info plate that there was nothing between there and the Antarctic on the west side. We stopped next at the Roaring Billy Falls. Roaring Billy Falls is one of the several waterfalls tumbling down the Haast River Valley walls before feeding the powdery blue Haast River. Along the river at the base of the falls was a wide stretch of pebbly area and the fun was walking towards this area from the road. One has to walk through a dense rain forest



Toward's Roaring Billy Falls

with the most fascinating growth of ferns and rare species of moss. Thunder Creek Falls was a brief stop next. A graceful and narrow 28m waterfall tumbling into the Haast River, this is another one of the falls of Mt. Aspiring National Park.

We reached Wanaka around half past five and found the Aspiring Glacier Motel. The motel was rather cute like a wooden chalet. It had cooking facilities too, all for \$ 70 per room. Arriving in the evening does help as far as the rate is concerned. And guess what, one of the large super market chains was bang next door. So that was what we did as soon as we had had our tea—went grocery shopping. Dinner was at nearby pub like place called Spaghetti House.

Our next stop was to be Te Anau, to be near the Milford and Doubtful Sounds. People had said not much would be available there so we shopped for wine and some grocery before leaving, not to forget the make- shift raincoats made of thin plastic. The latter being very important for the Sounds.



View from Crown Range Summit

We took a smaller and shorter road to Queenstown which was reputed to be very scenic. Started badly but soon justified its reputation. Some areas were stark mountains and other areas were green. We realized that we were climbing pretty high. And sure enough we had reached the highest ‘sealed’ (pucca) road in New Zealand. We realized this only when we reached the Pass called The Crown Range Summit and read the plaque there. Boy! Was it cold! But the view was enthralling! We got a bird’s eye view of the land around and Arrowtown too. We did not spend much time in Arrowtown. It is a very ‘New England’ look alike located at the base of snow covered mountains. The autumn colors were glorious

here. We took a slight diversion into Queenstown just to get acquainted with it as it was almost on the way. By now we had stopped exclaiming about the scenic beauty all the time!

Te Anau’s beauty was being situated on the Lake of the same name. The motel we found was a service apartment the sitting room of which was facing the lake. A quick ‘look’ of the town showed us that Te Anau had everything. There was no need to stock up at all! In fact what we had bought for \$59 was for \$43 in Te Anau! The good feeling was that we would probably spend three nights at Te Anau! I think all of us needed this sense of stability.

Milford Sound was just awesome, awesome and awesome! This is the Fiordland of the Southern Hemisphere (‘Sounds’ is the word for fiords in New Zealand). Right from the time we left Te Anau, the landscape was enchanting. First of all there was thick forest all along. One of the view points en route was the mirror lakes. There was a stretch of water at the base of the mountain range. The water was so still that the mountains were all mirrored in them in a very captivating way. To add to it all, there was a big rainbow which was also reflected in the water. Boardwalks made it easy to reach these spots.

These countries really know how to capitalize on the assets they have. Wish we could do more in our country which has such valuable natural assets.

The route was lined with stark mountains towering above us, laced with water falls. Only on seeing this did we understand what the lady at the info meant. When we went to book our tickets and expressed our fear of it being a rainy day, she was amused. She told us that rain was very welcome at Milford Sound, because the more the rain the more the falls. Then we reached a tunnel about a km long. As we emerged from the tunnel, there was the sudden vista of a wider expanse of mountains. Abstract meandering stripes of white over stark, stony, grey mountains. The amateur photographs do not justify the real picture. The boat tour we took was for \$ 63 per person for 2 hours. We were certainly grateful for the ponchos we had, for it was raining throughout. Even though the main area was enclosed there was an upper deck which was open and some of us liked being there in the open. It was especially nice when the boat went closer to the falls. The good thing was that there was tea, coffee and soup which one could help oneself to, throughout the cruise. So it was an exciting though wet 2 hours which kept us absorbed. Wet or fine, Milford is incredibly grand. Mitre Peak magnetises photographers, and the fiord's sheer cliffs excite both admiration and apprehension.

That evening we strolled across to the end of the road to have dinner at 'Moose'. The meal was good but a trifle small. The place was lively and 'happy'.

At the end of this cheerful evening we went to bed, looking forward to Doubtful Sound the next morning. We booked ourselves on a coach tour, which would pick us up from the motel. The bus took us to Maunapouri Lake, picking passengers up midway, from another bus coming in from Queenstown. Off the bus we had a short catamaran ride across the lake and into another bus which drove along the hilly track towards Doubtful Sound. The lake itself was peacefully beautiful, and surrounded by snow-peaked mountains whenever one could see them through the fog.

The bus took us towards Doubtful Sound, driving through thick forest. This forest is known to have 200 varieties of ferns and the Beech trees are taller and thicker. Doubtful Sound is sometimes called "the Sound of Silence". There is a cloistered serenity within it that contrasts with Milford Sound. The fiord is rich in flora and fauna. I believe New Zealand Fur Seals and Fiord land Crested Penguins can sometimes be seen on many of the small islets at the entrance of the fiord.



Doubtful Sound

At 421 metres deep, Doubtful is the deepest of the fiords and is long and winding with three distinct "arms" and several outstanding waterfalls in the area from Deep Cove to the open ocean, a distance of around 40.4 kilometres. There are many ways to experience Doubtful Sound - by kayak or cruise, as a day trip or on an overnight experience.

The day was bright and sunny, but *cold!* Of course, we spent most of the time on deck. As against the stark mountains of Milford Sound, these hills were thickly forested. The boat went up to the

Tasman Sea and up to a colony of seals that were basking in the sun. The captain took the boat to the edge at one point and shut off the engine, so that we could hear the natural sounds of the area, like birds chirping and water moving.

Leaving Te Anau we drove down to Queenstown. Found a lake facing motel for \$210 per night with 2 bedrooms and bathrooms and a kitchenette. The land lady had strict rules about no fish being cooked, as she said the smell never left the room. Having settled our bags we decided to take a driving tour of the town.



'Atop' Queenstown!

Surrounded by majestic mountains and nestled on the shores of crystal clear Lake Wakatipu, Queenstown is New Zealand's premier four season lake and alpine resort. It has a lot to offer by way of activities. There is bungy jumping, sky gliding, treks and skiing in the mountains around. Besides it is close enough to the fiords to make day trips, etc. I was a little out of sorts and felt exceptionally cold. We drove up to the hill top to get a good view of the town. Having done that, the others walked around the lake side, while I took refuge in a shop, to fight the cold. It proved profitable as that is where we found our down jackets which were marked down to 50%!

The following day we decided to do a Jet Boat Ride. It was quite and exhilarating experience. Toggled in our attire of life jackets we zoomed up and down the little rivulet, with a few spins here and there! Scary too, but great! Of course as soon as we got out and by the time we reached the shop, they had a DVD and photo album ready for us to buy if we so desired! Strike while the iron is hot!!

Enthused by the boat ride, I wanted to try the paragliding in the afternoon, but unfortunately it was off because of bad weather. I had to rest in bed that evening as I wasn't too well.

Before leaving Queenstown we drove to Edinburgh Drive which commanded an encompassing view of Queenstown. After that we went into town since I had spotted a Westpak Bank, where I had to deposit the fees for my speeding ticket. As a farewell we all shared a huge chocolate ice cream.

We were off towards Mount Cook. The first town we came to was Cromwell, after driving through the fruit region. There were fruit shops along the way too. We stopped at one called Sarita Orchards. We were rather intrigued by the name and wondered if it belonged to a person of Indian origin. But it wasn't. The owner pronounced it Sareeeta. Jams and jellies were being made in the kitchen behind. The fruit as such was not tempting, since it was not the right season I suppose. But there was a large variety of dried fruit like prunes, pistachios, apples, apricots, etc.

Our drive was through a landscape which had an interesting blend of brown mountains interspersed with blue river and the



Driving towards Twizel

Southern Alps, which were in view almost all the way through. We reached Twizel –The Town of Trees around 2.30pm.

Central to all the attractions of the Aoraki Mt Cook Mackenzie region, with the Southern Alps as a backdrop, the alpine retreat of Twizel is close to five picturesque lakes, including a world-standard rowing course and Formula One class boating area at Lake Ruataniwha. Twizel is a centre for tourism in the Aoraki Mount Cook Mackenzie District.

The Mackenzie Country Inn is where we decided to stay. It looked quite ‘historic’ and we realized later that it was a significant hotel indeed. That is because it is located in the town of Twizel which is in the very heart of the historic MacKenzie Basin, surrounded by



Mt. Cook

both man-made and natural lakes and waterways. Mount Cook is an hour away. It looked like an ‘old world’ hotel. Having checked in we drove off to Mount Cook. The drive was all along lake Pukakaki with the mountain range in view all the time. We got there by 4.30 and it gets dark by 5.30, so we did not have much time to spend there. And we discovered that there was plenty of accommodation there, in way of cottages and motels too! We could have spent the night in Mt. Cook it self.

Fortunately it was a clear day, so we walked around for more than an hour taking in the snow clad mountains and green paths around. At 3754 metres, New Zealand's highest mountain, Aoraki Mount

Cook is dazzling, yet there are 27 other mountains in this alpine backbone which peak at over 3050 metres, and hundreds of others not far short of that – all making up the famous Southern Alps.

On reaching Twizel, we walked around the market area a bit even though it was extremely cold. It was also to check out the possibility of going out for dinner later. That was out of question especially when we read the temperature as being 2 degrees C!

So we went back to the hotel split a bottle of wine—A Montana, Gisborne Chardonay, which was pretty good. After that we went down to the restaurant for dinner. I had tagiatelle pasta with prawns and fried salmon, served with a sauce and salad. Pretty good. Bijjan had a roast lamb with mashed potatoes and a large helping of roasted Kamara (Shakker Kandi)! I did not envy him his dish at all. For a change they even served good bread with the food. The ambience in the dining area was nice and it was right next to a lounge with a fire place. The whole place was very festive as there was a large group that was enjoying themselves with the music and the fire place.

The weather was not congenial to going back to Mount Cook, so we set out for Lake Tepako, en route to Hanmer Springs, stopping wherever we found attractive.

Lake Tepako is about 40 miles from Mt. Cook. There is a cute little church called The Good Shepherd, built in 1935. The church is right at the edge of the Lake. Opposite the church was the statue of a dog in Bronze. I forget the story, but it had something to do with the faithfulness of the dog.



View from Mt. John's Observatory

We drove up the Mt. John Observatory. Mt John is a *roche moutonnee*, an asymmetrical rock shaped by the movement of ancient glaciers. The large mass of bedrock attains an altitude of 1031 metres above sea level, rising approximately 300 metres above Lake Tekapo below. On the summit of Mt John is the University of Canterbury's astronomical observatory. During the day its domes can be seen from the Tekapo township. Naturally the

view was encompassing the whole of the Village and Lake of Tepako

For an hour after that the drive was flat land with a circle of brown mountains, some snow peaked, some not. The brown was beginning to get a bit tiring, so it was with relief that we came upon green pastures. We had reached Geraldine and feeling a bit hungry too. It was 1.30 pm. We realized by now that it would be very tiring to reach Hanmer Springs. We would have to drive on for another 3-4 hours, so we decided to look for another place to spend the night.

That is how we headed towards Mt. Hutt Lodge. Suddenly we saw a vehicle ahead of us, driving slowly, with a sign saying, 'Caution, Stock on road'. This was to warn us about cattle on road, so we slowed down and carefully dodging the cattle went ahead. Soon, we reached the impressive looking Rakaia Gorge. The Rakaia Gorge is located on the Rakaia River in inland Canterbury in New Zealand's South Island. Like its neighbor, the Waimakariri River, the Rakaia runs through wide shingle beds for much of its length, but is forced through a narrow canyon as it approaches the Canterbury Plains

So we went past the gorge to the Mt. Hutt Lodge, which was a much written about place. It is essentially a ski resort and offers other out door sports too. The description seemed totally justified in what the place looked like. Seemed a very desirable place to stay in, with its chalets looking over the Gorge. But guess what? It was closed!! We were surely taken aback that a resort of that size was closed. So after the enjoying the scenic beauty of the place we drove up to Methven, the township of Mt. Hutt Lodge. On looking around we decided to take a B&B called Skibos, on Forest Road, run by a very pleasant Liz. Our room had a stunning view of the snow



from our window at skibos

view peaked range, with the green belt in front of it. We could use the drawing room on the ground floor with its fire place. What seemed most welcome at that moment was the cup of delicious tea Liz offered us with Lamingtons and cookies.

Bijjan went out investigating the area, while I slept and woke up much better for the crocin and nose drops. We took our wine bottle and cheese down to share it with the Skibos. The husband had also come home and

we had a pleasant time in the warmth of the fire place. Our dinner at the Thai restaurant near by was very disappointing. Their seemed a tendency to make the thai curry thick and sweet. We were ready to sleep at 8.30 !!

We had breakfast at 8.30. I have to mention about how well the breakfast was laid out. It was laid out as a buffet. There were 4 rashers of bacon with 4 sausages and extremely well made scrambled eggs, with 2 fried tomatoes. The bread and toaster were lying there along with cereal, milk and yogurt. Not to forget the homemade jams and marmalade. The table was very tastefully laid too. I like that!

The drive to Hanmer Springs was also largely over flat land, but the mountains had green patches. Besides, along the roadside were meadows with cattle grazing at the bottom, which made it very picturesque. It took us three hours to reach. As usual we checked into the first motel we checked out, which was the Alpine Lodge. The B&Bs were quite expensive. I suppose the ones further away would have been more suitable. This one was built like the wooden chalets. It was *okay* for \$130, with kitchen facilities. Not much to write home about.

We had an American hot dog for lunch. This time we were careful to find out, because we had realized earlier that in New Zealand the hot dog is a crumb fried frankfurter on a stick! I had to rent out a costume for the hot springs. But what a treat the experience of the springs was! There were pools of four different temperatures which one could keep trying—36-39-40 and 41degrees C. Of course, we tried all four of them in turns.

Refreshed from the hot springs we drove the length of the town before we picked up some groceries and went back to the motel. Bijjan went out to do a survey about dinner. He selected a pub called Speights. The fish dishes all had roasted Veges (meaning, roasted pumpkin, parsnip, courgette, kumara---ugh!), so we had chicken instead. Food in NZ is basically meat or fried fish. There is very little of grilled fish.



Cemetery at Hanmer Springs

After breakfast we went for a drive. The town is full of walking paths, which are thickly forested. We stopped at a cemetery, and just stayed there, listening to the chirping of the birds and the silence of the forest. There was a combination of very musical whistles of different tenors and a squawky sound intervening from time to time. It was tremendously soothing just standing there and drinking in the peaceful atmosphere. Then we had our second session at the hot springs before leaving for Christ Church.

We stopped briefly at the Mud House Winery, where we tasted some wine and ended up having a coffee at their café. It seemed like a nice place for a café type of lunch. The winery was a very inviting place.

Coming into Avenue motel at Christ Church was like coming home. Robin was his smiley best.

We went down to Café Valentino down the road for dinner. The café seemed to be the happening place. It was pretty packed. The ravioli stuffed with wild mushroom and spinach in a tomato sauce was yummy indeed! The place was still in full swing when we left at 10.30.

Thus was spent our last evening in Christ Church, rather New Zealand! But yes, we were more than ready to go home now!